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ABSTRACT

In 1986, the Center for Education Statistics (CES) initiated a series of meetings with a wide range of private school representatives. At these meetings, a need for more complete information on the data collection efforts of the various private groups was identified, and as a result, CES agreed to investigate the extent and nature of the education statistics currently being collected. This paper describes the lines of inquiry, the findings, and some tentative implications for data collection in the private school sector. Each of 22 organizations including 15 member organizations of the Council for American Private Education--CAPE--and the National Catholic Educational Association, (estimated to cover 90-95 percent of private school activity) were asked to send CES copies of the forms they use to collect education statistics and examples of the reports prepared from them. A tentative set of data elements for a common system was developed, and each organization's coverage of the set was depicted in matrix form; both items were sent to all 22 organizations. A review of the materials supplied and the analysis of these and the matrix suggest that, except for the very broadest of generalizations, it would not be possible to derive a national picture from the aggregation of data as presently collected by the private school organizations. CES envisions a period during which CES and the various associations and private school representatives would negotiate the elements of a common "core" system and establish common definitions and procedures for data collection covering a limited data set. This effort would be coordinated with CES's public school data collections to permit further comparisons. (MLF)

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Center for Education Statistics

Special report

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Private School Statistics: A Review of Private and Federal Data Concerns

David B. Orr

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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Private School Statistics: A Review of Private and Federal Data Concerns

Background

Over the past few years, the Center for Education Statistics (CES) has collected education statistics about the elementary/secondary level of private school education on an aperiodic basis. Surveys were done for school years 1976-77, 1977-78, 1980-81, 1983-84, and 1985-86. Except for the last one, all of these surveys have attempted to develop a list of the universe of private elementary/secondary schools conforming to a definition established by the Center.[1] In each case, however, there have been questions about the completeness of coverage of the surveys--that is, the extent to which the survey methodologies have been successful in developing a comprehensive list of all private schools fitting the definition. While the resulting statistics have always been thought to be "close" to the unknown universe counts, it has never been possible to demonstrate this, and consequently, there have remained differing opinions as to the "degree of undercount" attached to the figures from these surveys.

While this issue has not yet been laid to rest, the Center has continued to devote efforts to improving its coverage of the private sector schools. For example, the 1983-84 survey employed a methodology featuring the supplementation of the universe list of schools with a search of sampled geographical areas designed to discover unlisted private schools and include them in the data collection. This methodology[2] may hold considerable promise for future studies designed to develop accurate national estimates of key statistics on private school education.

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[1]An eligible school met three criteria: 1) it included a first or higher grade; 2) it was housed in a facility other than a private home; and 3) it provided 4 or more hours of education per day, for a minimum of 160 days per year. Children attending daycare centers, nursery schools, and institutions without a first grade were not included.

[2]U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Private Elementary and Secondary Education, 1983: Enrollment, Teachers, and Schools." Washington, D.C., December 1984.

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At the same time, the increased attention which education in general has received in the past several years, along with companion efforts at reform, has resulted in correspondingly more attention to the role played by the private sector schools in the American educational enterprise. The latest Center data (1985-86) confirm the major (and growing) role assumed by private education, showing that some 25 percent of the elementary/secondary schools in the land are private, and that they serve over 12 percent of the student enrollment at these levels. All of this has led the Center to increase its own efforts to adequately represent this sector in its data collection program.

In designing and implementing its private school data collections, CES has traditionally worked with two major organizations in private education: the Council for American Private Education (CAPE), a federation of member organizations concerned with providing private school education, and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), the professional education association of the largest single provider of private education, the Catholic Church. Although the Center has continued to enjoy excellent and close relationships with both CAPE and NCEA, ongoing concerns with improving both the coverage and quality of CES private school data suggested a broader exploration of avenues through which to collect such data. It was realized that working through CAPE and NCEA, although effective in many ways, tended to isolate CES from the grassroots of private education, and that achieving further improvement in the Center's private school data collections would require more indepth knowledge. Beginning early in 1986, CES initiated a series of meetings with a wide range of individuals, organizations, and associations concerned with private education. The focus of these meetings was to develop a better understanding by CES personnel of the nature, problems, and diversity of private elementary/secondary education, while communicating the scope and character of Federal data concerns to these private school representatives.

It has been the Center's judgment that the meetings held among Center staff and the private school representatives during the past year have been fruitful and penetrating, producing increased understanding and fostering a growing spirit of cooperation. The Center has gained new appreciation of the rich diversity to be found among the various private schools, and some sense of the implications of that diversity for the development of a data collection program that could adequately portray it. The Center also gained new understanding of the relationships among data from various private school groups and the national estimates which are the primary product of the Federal data collections. Reasons for the participation and nonparticipation of various segments of the private school universe have been discussed, and the importance of producing data usable not only at the national level, but by the individual private school groups, has been revealed. Various gaps in knowledge have also come to light.

One of the more intriguing questions that emerged from these meetings was whether or not some of the Federal needs for data might be served by data already being collected by the various groups and organizations which exist in the private sector. If so, such information might then be supplied to CES by those organizations, instead of surveying the schools for it. However, none of the organizations represented knew just what the others were collecting, or how

they used it, and CES was equally uninformed. As a result, CES agreed to undertake to determine the extent and nature of the education statistics currently being collected by the various elementary/secondary private school organizations for their own purposes, and to consider the implications of such collections for meeting of the larger needs for statistical information about private school education.

It is the purpose of this paper to present what CES has learned so far with respect to this question. Thus, the remainder of this paper is devoted to describing the lines of inquiry, the findings, and some tentative implications for data collection in the private school sector.

Procedures

At the beginning of this procedure, CES staff were unaware of what statistics the various private school organizations might be collecting for their own use. Knowing the diversity among private schools, it had always been assumed that any such collections would lack the comparability required for the Center to aggregate them into the sorts of national estimates needed to inform national policymakers, legislators, and the education public in general. However, the development of closer working relationships with the various private school organizations encouraged and demanded the evaluation of this assumption. Therefore, it was decided to ask each of a number of organizations to send CES copies of the forms they use to collect education statistics, and examples of the reports prepared from them.

The next step was to identify the organizations to which these questions would be addressed (many of which had participated in the meetings mentioned above). It was decided that the inquiry would focus on the 15 member organizations of CAPE, including NCEA. The names, addresses, and contacts for these organizations were supplied by CAPE. In addition, a number of nonCAPE organizations were identified through consultation with CAPE and with personnel in the Department of Education's Office of Private Education, and inquiries were made of seven additional organizations. Based on general considerations and informed professional judgment, CES believes that these 22 organizations cover perhaps 90-95 percent of private school activity at the elementary/secondary level. (Of course, this estimate cannot be confirmed in the absence of a complete universe of such schools.)

Initial inquiries were made by telephone over a period of about two weeks. Virtually all organizations responded by sending some material, though the nature and amount of detail included varied widely. These materials were subjected to review and abstraction, and some additional telephone calls were made for clarifications. The materials were then analyzed for content and comparability and summary conclusions drawn. A tentative set of data elements for a common system was developed, and each organization's coverage of the set was depicted in matrix form. These products were presented in late October, 1986, at a meeting of representatives of the various organizations for their comment and criticism. Finally, after some revision and explication, the data element definitions and the matrix of provider capability were sent to all 22 organizations with a request for comment, correction of errors, and supplementation (if needed).

Table 1 shows the current capability of the 22 individual organizations (as estimated by CES from their reports) to provide each of the data elements either exactly or in some useful approximation. This set of data elements and their definitions compose but one possible subset of a large number of data elements which might be collected in this area. There is no brief that it is the only, or even the best, such set, but it serves to illustrate the level of comparability among the data elements collected by the various organizations.

Findings

A review of the materials supplied and the analysis of these and the matrix suggests the following conclusions:

1. Only a few of the 22 organizations contacted collect a broad range of well-defined data--beyond these few, scope and precision appear to diminish. Not surprisingly, these few are among the larger organizations, and include the National Catholic Educational Association, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and the National Association of Independent Schools. Each of these groups asks questions about enrollment, schools, staff, and finances, and each has provided instructions and definitions to cover at least some of the ambiguities inherent in the questioning process. The next group, Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the Friends Society, use brief questionnaires, but do not address the definitional problem. Others, e.g., the American Montessori Schools and the National Association of Episcopal Schools, appear to get most of their information as part of a membership application form process. And finally, some organizations, such as the American Association of Christian Schools International, appear to collect only directory information.

2. There is considerable commonality in the substance of the data collected. Virtually all of the organizations collect information about the number of schools and their enrollments. Quite a few also collect some data about staffing and salaries, and more than half solicit information about tuition and fees. Schools are usually described in terms of level and grade span, or both, and enrollment is frequently taken by grade and sex and by race/ethnicity categories. Staff data are less rich, but are usually broken out by at least one other variable, such as sex, race/ethnicity, or full- or part-time, and the administrator's name is usually given. There is some commonality in what is not collected, as well. Outcome variables, such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, dropout rates, and awards, are requested infrequently. There is relatively little collected on teacher certification and school accreditation, and on teacher training and experience levels.

3. The commonalities which do exist are limited by wide differences in form and specifics of the data collections (wording of questions, timing, and differences in definitions).

This means that it would not be wise to try to add together the data from the collections of the different organizations. In most cases, this would be like adding "apples and oranges," because of the various areas of noncomparability in these collections. Thus, except for the very broadest of generalizations, it would not be possible to derive a national picture from the aggregation of data as presently collected by the private school organizations. For example, while it might be possible to accept rough figures for numbers of schools and total enrollment, such data would not be sufficiently comparable to permit contrasting the various organizations with each other. If the totals received from the organizations contacted are extrapolated and suitable estimates made for missing data, there are 26,200 private schools nationally serving 5,495,000 students with 246,000 staff (table 2).[3] These figures compare to the latest (1985-86) CES survey data as follows: 28,000; 5,557,000; and 404,000, respectively. As can be seen, the data for schools and enrollment are relatively close, but there is a vast difference in the area of staff (where the private school organizations report collecting less data, and more estimation was necessary). At higher levels of specificity, it could be expected that differences would be magnified.

Table 3 illustrates some of the differences in forms and definitions which were observed in the materials reported by the various private school organizations. While such differences might be solved by coordination among the organizations, they clearly argue against any detailed comparisons based on current data.

Future prospects

Cost considerations, along with the difficulties inherent in defining and covering universes, may limit many of CES's future data collections to sample studies. Yet, as indicated in the discussions of the past year and the review of data collections, the universe of private schools is hugely diverse and difficult to represent accurately in sample surveys. In addition, these discussions revealed the deep interest of private school representatives in gaining subgroup representativeness, so that each group might be able to compare their own statistics to those from other groups of interest, as well as to national estimates. Thus, it appears unlikely that simple extensions of present Federal methodologies can reach the level of detail and idiosyncratic content needed to meet the varied interests of the private school groups.

[3] Estimates may be expected to have a rather large margin of error, and were generally based upon computing ratios and averages of data received and using them to estimate missing data. For example, if number of students were known, but not number of staff for a group, the overall student/staff ratio for all reporting groups was used to estimate the number of staff for the missing group.

If CES surveys were to return to universe collections, even with area searches to supplement list-based procedures, it would be impractical to include the range of content needed to satisfy all of the varied private school interests. For instance, Federal surveys could not efficiently cover the details of different ways in which various religious groups structure their support and sponsorship of their schools, since, in many cases, this would require separate sets of detailed questions peculiar to the individual organizations. An example might be the details of diocesan operation for the Catholic schools as opposed to the Hebrew-English dichotomy in Hebrew schools and their relationships with the Hebrew Federation. This kind of detail for the various private school constituencies would result in unwieldy Federal surveys with much of the content of less than general interest.

On the other hand, the review reported here has also amply demonstrated that CES cannot simply aggregate information already being collected by the various associations for the purpose of constructing national estimates of private school statistics. This is true because of definitional and other comparability problems which argue against simply adding items across groups, and content needs at the Federal level which go beyond the scope of association collections. For example, the last CES survey went into much greater detail about teaching assignments, teacher preparations, and Federal program participation than private school groups might be expected to collect.

Perhaps there is a fruitful middle ground--one which would yield some improvements in the scope and utility of private school statistics for both sides.

It has been noted that there are considerable and notable commonalities among the data collected by many of the private school associations--though certain noncomparabilities inhibit their aggregability. Setting those noncomparabilities aside for the moment, it might be possible to specify a limited data set, which would contain data elements of interest to most, if not all, of the private school groups, as well as to CES. Working cooperatively, CES and the various groups might be able to settle upon such a data set, to be collected through the offices of the various associations. As a "universe" collection, data from this set would enable the various associations and CES to assess the relative characteristics of any subgroups versus any others and the national and regional groupings. Schools could be classified along different dimensions of diversity and different groupings compared. Were such a data collection strategy to be implemented, and the comparability problems solved, it should be possible for CES to accept such data for national estimate purposes without engaging in duplicate data collections for these key elements. Such acceptance would, of course, be conditioned by evidence of adequate response rates and other quality control factors.

How might the noncomparability problem be handled? To a certain extent, noncomparability is a function of necessarily different content which arises from the essential differences in structure and operation characterizing a particular group of schools. For example, Hebrew schools would require

information about Hebrew studies, which would be of no interest to Montessori schools. This type of comparability problem is dealt with either by eliminating a data element from the common core of the system, or by building in the appropriate response options to be chosen by the differing groups, as applicable.

The more important aspect of noncomparability arises from the use of similar, but different, definitions for the same concepts. Not that these differences are necessarily trivial, but they are at least amenable to discussion and resolution in most cases. CES envisions a period of time during which CES and the various associations and private school representatives would negotiate the elements of a common "core" system, and common definitions and procedures for data collection (standard dates of collection, forms, etc.) covering a limited data set, and coordinated with CES's public school data collections to permit further comparisons.

The data set shown in table 1 is the one used to collect the information presented here, but there is no argument that it should be the one used in cooperative work. The actual development process might well start with an even more limited set as the basis for the negotiation of content and definitions. Elements might then be added in subsequent collections as the result of continued negotiations and developing needs.

Once such a system were in place, comparative studies would be possible in the various areas covered by the limited "core" system, perhaps teacher data, tuition levels, salaries, per-pupil expenditure, and so forth. The addition of just a few outcome variables, such as promotion rates and test scores, would enhance the power of the system even further. In addition, private vs. public school comparisons could be made on those variables also contained in CES's public school data collections.

CES would then be free to drop some of the basic statistics content in its current and planned private school sample collections and concentrate more on issues of national import, such as teacher incentives, Federal program participation, and other national policy issues. Private school organizations, on the other hand, might supplement the limited data set with brief ad hoc inquiries regarding the issues of particular concern only to each particular group--religious issues, variations in tuition structure, governance, volunteerism, and the like. Any special studies conducted by CES would be likely done more efficiently and more representatively because they would be based upon samples from an improved and up-to-date universe list derived from the development of the limited "core" system (which would include joint efforts to identify private schools that are not members of the various associations). This procedure is analogous to CES's current efforts to develop a universe of public schools (through its Common Core of Data program), which may then form the basis for special purpose sample surveys in the public school arena. Finally, reduced duplication and burden could be expected, combined with significant overall improvement and articulation of information on private school education and its role in the American educational enterprise.

The Center for Education Statistics is prepared and eager to continue its dialog with the private school community, to explore these ideas, and to assist in the cooperative achievement of our common goals.

Table 1.—Current capabilities of organizations to provide selected data elements

Target system elements	Name of CAPE* organization														
	National Catholic Educational Association	Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	General Council of Seventh Day Adventists	National Association of Independent Schools	American Lutheran Church Christian Day Schools	American Montessori Society	Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches	Association of Military Schools	Christian Schools, International	Friends Council on Education	National Association of Episcopal Schools	National Association of Private Schools for Exceptional Children	National Society for Hebrew Day Schools	Solomon Schechter Day School Association	U.S. Catholic Conference
Schools															
I.D.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	NR	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	NR
County	M	M	M		M	M	M		M	M	M	M	M	M	
Affiliation	Y	Y	Y	P		Y	Y			Y	Y				
Year founded (age)	P	Y		Y		Y						Y			
Type (regular or special purpose)	D	D	D	D		D					D	D	Y		
Accreditation		Y		Y							Y	Y	D		
Administrator's name	D	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		D	Y	Y		Y		
Level (grade span)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	D	Y	D	Y	Y	
Affiliation (membership)	Y	Y	Y		Y					Y	Y				
Enrollment															
Total (headcount)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Grade	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	D				D	D		Y	Y	
Sex		P	Y	Y								P	Y		
Race/ethnicity (percent minority)	Y	D	Y	D	D		D			D	M	P			
Special education (handicap)	P	P										D	D		
Staff															
Teachers (headcount)	Y	Y	Y	Y	D	Y	D		D	Y	Y	P	Y		
Sex	P	Y	Y	Y	Y					Y	Y				
Level (grade)	Y	Y	Y		D	P			Y						
Race/ethnicity (percent minority)		D	Y	D	D		D			D					
Administrators (headcount)		Y	D	D	Y					Y		P			
Part-time teachers		Y	Y	D	Y	P				Y	Y		Y		
Tuition															
Type	D	P		D									Y		
Highest—first child	Y	Y		D	Y	D	Y		Y	D			D	D	
By affiliation membership	Y	Y													
By level	Y	Y		D	Y	Y	Y		P	D				D	
Salary															
Starting lay teachers	D	D		D	D	D	D		Y				Y		
"New" administrator	D	D		D	D	D	D		D						
Other fiscal															
Per-pupil expenditure (operating expenditures)	Y	Y		Y					Y				Y		
Total annual revenue	Y	Y		Y	PD								P		
Gift revenue	Y	P		Y											
Affiliation subsidy revenue	Y	Y			D								P		
Federal revenue	Y	P		Y											
Other public source revenue	Y	P		Y											

*Council for American Private Education.

Key

Y = Yes D = Yes, but different form NR = No response
M = Maybe P = Partial

Table 1.—Current capabilities of organizations to provide selected data elements—continued

Target system elements	Name of non-CAPE organization							Availability (ratio of respondents who can provide)
	Accelerated Christian Education	American Association of Christian Schools International	Association of Christian Schools International	Jewish Elementary Education Association	National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise	National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools	National Federation of Church Schools	
Schools								
I.D.	Y	Y	Y	Y	NR	NR	NR	17/17
County	M	M	M	M				16/17
Affiliation	Y		Y	Y				11/17
Year founded (age)	Y		Y	Y				8/17
Type (regular or special purpose)	Y			Y				10/17
Accreditation				Y				6/17
Administrator's name	Y	Y	Y	Y				15/17
Level (grade span)	Y	Y	Y	Y				17/17
Affiliation (membership)	Y			Y				8/17
Enrollment								
Total (headcount)	Y	Y	Y	Y				17/17
Grade	Y		D	Y				13/17
Sex				Y				6/17
Race/ethnicity (percent minority)				D				10/17
Special education (handicap)								4/17
Staff								
Teachers (headcount)	Y		D	Y				15/17
Sex				Y				8/17
Level (grade)								6/17
Race/ethnicity (percent minority)				D				7/17
Administrators (headcount)	Y							7/17
Part-time teachers				Y				9/17
Tuition								
Type								4/17
Highest—first child				Y				11/17
By affiliation membership								2/17
By level								9/17
Salary								
Starting lay teachers								8/17
"New" administrator	Y							8/17
Other fiscal								
Per-pupil expenditure (operating expenditures)								5/17
Total annual revenue								5/17
Gift revenue								3/17
Affiliation subsidy revenue								4/17
Federal revenue								3/17
Other public source revenue								3/17

Table 2.--Number of private elementary/secondary schools, students, and staff reported by various associations: 1986

Name of association	Number of schools	Number of students	Number of staff
Total	26,164	5,495,207	246,195
CAPE[1]			
National Catholic Educational Association	9,245	2,821,000	146,594
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	1,837	211,836	11,798
General Council of Seventh Day Adventists	1,314	67,744	5,191
National Association of Independent Schools	859	342,403	34,017
American Lutheran Church Christian Day Schools	437	35,516	2,021
American Montessori Society	640[2]	50,000[2]	1,787
Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches	19	3,500	175
Association of Military Schools	15[2]	4,174[2]	238[3]
Christian Schools, International	400	72,000	3,617
Friends Council on Education	70	15,901	1,338
National Association of Episcopal Schools	824	142,942	8,159[3]
National Association of Private Schools for Exceptional Children	168	14,500	828[3]
National Society for Hebrew Day Schools	555[2]	100,000[1]	5,708[3]
Solomon Schecter Day School Association	67	13,389	764[3]
U.S. Catholic Conference	NA	NA	NA

Table 2.--Number of private elementary/secondary schools, students, and staff reported by various associations: 1986--continued

Name of association	Number of schools	Number of students	Number of staff
NonCAPE[4]			
Accelerated Christian Education	6,000[2]	966,000[3]	13,467[3]
American Association of Christian Schools International	1,200[2]	180,000[3]	2,510[3]
Association of Christian Schools International	2,468[2]	416,061[2]	5,800[3]
Jesuit Secondary Education Association	46	38,241	2,183[3]
National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise	NA	NA	NA
National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools	NA	NA	NA
National Federation of Church Schools	NA	NA	NA

[1]Council for American Private Education.

[2]Compiled from earlier reports.

[3]Estimated. See text footnote 3.

[4]These organizations are not members of the Council for American Private Education.

NA = Not available.

Table 3.--Illustration of noncomparabilities in forms and definitions submitted by associations

Student headcounts

- Some data collections are fall collections with specific dates, some are fall collections with no specific dates, and some take place anytime.
- Some include preschool with an unknown proportion of childcare, some do not include preschool, and some use unknown categories.
- Some would appear to include part-time, while others parcel these out.

School type

- Some are undifferentiated on forms, while
- Others classify schools according to levels, or

  --according to sex, or

  --according to church affiliation (e.g., single congregation, interparish, and independent), or

  --according to residence (day, boarding, residential, summer, clinic, etc.).

Teacher headcount

- Some data collections break out full- and part-time, others combine them.
- Some collect data by sex (religious personnel only).
- Administrators may be counted separately or combined with instructional staff.
- Some count "lead" teachers, or "ordained clergy" only.

Table 3.--Illustration of noncomparabilities in forms and definitions submitted by associations--continued

Student race/ethnicity categories

- Some used no breakout.
- Some used the Office of Management and Budget categories (white, non-Hispanic; black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; American Indian or Alaskan Native; and Asian American or Pacific Islander).
- Some failed to break Hispanic from the white and black categories.
- Some used obsolete categories or terms, such as American Negro.
- Some used total, black and other non-white.
- Some used percent minority, not otherwise defined.

Tuition and fees

- In some cases, it was unclear whether or not fees were included.
- Some used age ranges, others used annualized figures, others used averages.
- Some collected tuition by level, others by grade, one by age.
- Sometimes the amount was for first child in family without discounts, or sometimes the references for the amount was unspecified.
- In some cases, tuition was broken out by membership in the organization versus nonmembership (student, or one or both parents).

Salaries

- Figures were sometimes averages, sometimes actual, sometimes given in categories.
- Reported salaries were sometimes lay versus religious, with or without value of contributed services.
- Sometimes salaries included teachers, administrators, both, or all staff.

Table 3.--Illustration of noncomparabilities in forms and definitions submitted by associations--continued

Operating expenditures

- Some gave operating expenditures without reference to capital expenditures and debt service (may be included or excluded).

- Some gave detailed breakouts, others single figures; some gave per-pupil expenditures, not otherwise defined.

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For Further Information

Additional information about CES's elementary/secondary education surveys may be obtained by contacting Mary Williams, Condition of Education Division, phone (202) 357-6807.